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Equal Opportunities Commission

Fathers and the modern family

There is growing interest in the role of fathers in their children's lives following years of neglect when the spotlight was focused firmly on the mothers' role. Fathers' roles are evolving in response to substantial social and economic changes over the past thirty years. These include large numbers of mothers entering employment, families becoming more diverse and fluid in form, structural changes to male employment (particularly affecting the employment opportunities of skilled manual and unskilled workers) and widening differences in the life chances of different family types.

A new analysis of the Millennium Cohort Surveys (MCS) commissioned by the Equal Opportunities Commission presents important new evidence about the links between a father's role and the well-being of children. The findings illustrate the multi-faceted nature of contemporary fatherhood, going well beyond the traditional provider role. Like mothers, many fathers feel they do not spend enough time with their children and this causes considerable frustration and tension. Earlier research has already highlighted the aspirations of modern fathers to have a closer and warmer relationship with their children than they had with their own fathers (Hatter et al., 2002). Fifteen per cent of babies in the MCS were born to parents who were not co-resident. So the analysis also gives an important insight into how involved these fathers were in their children's early lives, and how relationships change over time.

Key findings

- Fathers' well-being and behaviour affects their children's development - having low educational qualifications, little or no employment, not using paternity leave or not sharing childcare responsibilities increases the likelihood of a 3 year old child having developmental problems.
- Most fathers have a warm relationship with their child and are regularly involved in activities such as reading and playing with their child – but many feel they do not spend enough time with their young child.
- The vast majority of fathers (91%) are in paid work, and their earnings are crucial to keeping their family out of poverty. There is a strong connection between being out of work and low income, but families with only one earner were also more vulnerable to low household incomes.
- There are significant differences between fathers' access to and use of different types of leave and flexible working arrangements – those in professional and administrative occupations generally had more access to flexibility than those in skilled manual, semi and unskilled occupations.
- Of the 15% of fathers were not living with the child's mother at the time of their child's birth – two thirds were still in contact when their baby was 9-10 months old. This was strongly influenced by the friendliness of the father's and mother's relationship.

It is important to note that the data used in this study relates to a period prior to significant changes to maternity and paternity rights, first in 2003 and then subsequently in 2007. These include extensions to maternity leave and pay, the introduction of 2 weeks' paid paternity leave (for employed fathers) and the right for parents of children under 6 to request flexible working. Additionally, in 2004, the government launched its ten-year childcare strategy with a number of measures to improve the quality, affordability and accessibility of childcare services.

Policy implications

There is an urgent need for further research to enlarge our understanding of the connections between fathers and children's development. Policy makers and service providers need to become more responsive to fathers' parenting role. The workplace needs to adjust to meet fathers' aspirations when their children are born and to enable the sharing of caring roles with mothers. Service providers need to direct attention to both mothers *and* fathers in the provision of child and family support and services to give children the best start in life.

The full report, *Parental Care and Employment in Early Childhood – Working Paper Series No 57* by Shirley Dex and Kelly Ward, Institute of Education, can be downloaded from the Equal Opportunities Commission website at: http://www.eoc.org.uk/PDF/WP57_parental_care.pdf

This data is taken from the Millennium Cohort Survey, a longitudinal study following a national representative sample of babies born between September 2000 and December 2001. The MCS covers all four countries in the UK, but this analysis focuses only on England, Scotland and Wales. The first data sweep was carried out when the baby was 9-10 months old and included 16,588 mothers and 11,935 fathers. The second sweep, undertaken at age three, includes follow-up information on 14,048 mothers and 9,747 fathers.

Dads are important and it's not just about earning the money

A number of recent research studies have charted the evolving nature of fathers' relationship with their children. Fathers spend more time with their children than in the past, are more involved in childcare and undertake a wide range of activities with their children, in addition to fulfilling their traditional breadwinning role (O'Brien, 2005). This study confirms these trends and also enables us to look at how the different behaviours and characteristics of fathers affect their children's development, giving much needed evidence and balance to debates about what matters for children's well-being.

Evidence from this study suggests that fathers' characteristics play an important role in child development. These include personal, behavioural and employment characteristics.

- **Fathers' personal characteristics**, such as having low educational qualifications, being very young at the child's birth, having a high depression score when the child was aged 9-10 months old, all increased the likelihood of a three year old child having developmental problems.
- **Fathers' employment characteristics**, such as having little or no employment, not taking any leave at the time of the child's birth or taking only annual or sick leave compared with a mix of leave, or not using flexible working options where available, compared with using them, also increased the likelihood of child development problems.
- **Fathers' behaviour**, such as allowing the mother to do all the home based childcare rather than sharing, also contributed to an increased likelihood of child development problems.

Most fathers had a warm relationship with their children and were regularly involved in many activities with them.

- 91 per cent of fathers who lived with their 3 year old child felt they had a warm relationship with them. For those who were not in employment, the rate was slightly lower at 85 per cent.
- Just over half of fathers reported reading daily to their three year old child, and another 3 in 10 reported reading to them weekly. Fathers educated to degree level or equivalent were twice as likely to read to their child daily than those with no qualifications, whereas fathers who worked full-time read to their child more frequently than those employed part-time or not at all.
- 77 per cent of fathers employed full-time played with their child daily, rising to 87 per cent of those who were not working. But fathers were less involved in preparing/putting their child to bed: 24 per cent said they did this daily and 65 per cent weekly.
- Fathers who had taken leave around the birth read to their child with greater frequency than those who had not, and were slightly more likely to put their child to bed daily. But there was no apparent link between taking leave and having a warm relationship or playing with their three year old child.

But many fathers feel that they do not spend enough time with their children

- 63 per cent of fathers who worked full-time did not feel that they spent enough time with their 9-10 month old baby. Among working fathers this differed by ethnicity: around 6 in 10 white and Black Caribbean fathers felt they did not spend enough time with their child, compared with 3 in 10 Pakistani and Bangladeshi fathers.
- By the time their child was three, this gap had narrowed due to a rise in the proportion of Pakistani and Bangladeshi fathers feeling they did not spend enough time with their child, but a slight decrease in the percentage of white and Black Caribbean fathers who felt this way.

Fathers shared some of the childcare but responsibility for a sick child still lay firmly with the mother, and some families moved to more traditional patterns of care over time.

- Fathers were far more likely to provide childcare for their 9-10 month old child when the mother was from a lower socio-economic group. 53 per cent of fathers shared the childcare where the mother was in semi and unskilled occupations, compared to just 20 per cent where the mother was a manager or professional.
- When asked who mainly looked after the three year old child when ill, around 7 in 10 mothers said that they did and 3 in 10 reported that they shared with their partner. In only 1 per cent of cases did mothers report that the father took the main responsibility. Not surprisingly, fathers were most likely to look after a sick child when the mother only was employed, but still only in 1 in 10 cases.
- Who cared for the child was not linked to whether the father took any leave around the child's birth. However, there was a shift over time with half of families who shared care for a sick child at 9-10 months old moving to the mother doing most of it by the time the child was three.

Dads at work

Most fathers are in paid work and their earnings are crucial to the family. Many share responsibility for earning with their partner, but the patterns of employment often change after the birth of the baby, when mothers may reduce their working hours or withdraw from employment leaving the father as the sole earner. So fathers' breadwinning role becomes more important at a time when they want to spend more time with their young children (Thompson et al., 2006). Fathers, like mothers, may experience tensions in balancing their work and family life.

Most fathers were working when their child was 9-10 months old:

- 91 per cent of fathers were employed and of these, 85 per cent worked full-time
- A higher proportion of Pakistani (22 per cent) and Indian fathers (20 per cent) were self-employed than those of other ethnicities (16 per cent overall).
- 9 per cent of fathers were not in paid work, rising to 19 per cent of Pakistani and 22 per cent of Bangladeshi fathers. Fewer than 1 per cent of fathers had never had a paid job.

Fathers were crucial in keeping their family out of poverty. Having a low household income was strongly tied to a lack of employment, so where the father was not in work this had a huge effect on the family finances.

- 59 per cent of couple households where neither parent was employed had a low income (less than £11,000 per annum) when their child was 3, although lone parent families where the parent was not employed were the most likely to have a low income (88 per cent).
- 10 per cent of couple households where the father only was employed had a low income, compared with 28 per cent where the mother only was employed.
- The highest frequency of low-income families was among Bangladeshi (47 per cent), Pakistani and Black Caribbean families (both 40 per cent). The latter group is due to the high proportion of Black Caribbean mothers who are lone parents, whereas father only employment is the principal employment type for Pakistani and Bangladeshi households, where there is also a high level of unemployment.

The "breadwinner dad, stay at home mum" model is increasingly a thing of the past. There was considerable movement in couples' employment when they had a young child and fathers were more likely to be the sole earner than before the child's birth.

- The "breadwinner dad, stay at home mum" model is now only the case for a minority of families. The father was the only one employed when the child was 9-10 months old in 34 per cent of families. Mothers and fathers both worked in 42% of families with a child aged 9-10 months old, with the father being employed full-time and the mother part-time in 31 per cent. In 11 per cent of families both parents were employed full time.
- In half of couples where both parents had worked prior to the child's birth, the father was employed full-time and the mother part-time when their child was 9-10 months old while in a quarter, only the father was employed.
- Where the father only had been working before the child's birth, in 84 per cent of cases he remained the sole earner when the child was 9-10 months old.
- The proportion of different household types was very similar when the child was three. But there were distinct ethnic variations; in 60 per cent of Pakistani and 51 per cent of Bangladeshi families (by the mother's ethnicity), only the father was working.

Flexibility at work

It is widely accepted that mothers will make use of flexible working arrangements to combine their roles as carers and workers. But it is still less accepted for fathers to do so. Their access to flexible working arrangements depends heavily on their socio-economic status and the type of work they do.

There is a marked divide between 'have and have-not' families. Fathers in higher occupational groups are more likely to have access to longer paternity leave, for their statutory pay entitlement to be topped up by their employer and to be offered certain types of flexible working than other fathers are.

Lower paid fathers took less leave and were less likely to receive additional financial support from their employer above the statutory minimum, than better-paid fathers.

- Most employed fathers took some form of leave around the birth of their child, including annual, paternity, sick or other leave. Skilled, semi and unskilled manual workers were the most likely not to take leave or to rely on only annual or sick leave and less likely than those in higher socio-economic groups to take a combination of leave. Overall, 21 per cent of fathers took no leave at all, rising to 53 per cent of Bangladeshi and 46 per cent of Pakistani fathers.
 - Evidence since the introduction of 2 weeks statutory paternity leave and pay rights in April 2003 shows that fathers earning less than £1,000 gross per month were far more likely to take less than two weeks leave (around half) compared with those earning over this amount (less than one-third). Similarly, unskilled manual workers were the most likely to take just one week of leave (Smeaton and Marsh, 2006).
 - In 2005, after paternity and pay rights had been introduced, 45 per cent of fathers earning less than £1,000 a month did not receive any paternity leave on full pay, compared with only 9 per cent of those earning more than £3,000 a month. (Smeaton and Marsh, 2006)
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There were large differences in fathers' access to and use of different types of flexible working arrangements ranging from part-time working and flexitime to special shifts, again depending on their occupation and ethnicity.

- Non-manual occupations, often at the higher end of the pay spectrum, tended to have greater access to flexible working than manual occupations. For example, around half of managers and professionals and admin and clerical staff had access to flexible working hours at the time of survey in 2001/02, compared with only 1 in 5 fathers working in skilled manual, semi and unskilled occupations.
- In contrast, fathers in lower paid manual occupations and Pakistani and Bangladeshi fathers were more likely to use part-time working and special shifts. But such working arrangements may not be a positive choice for these fathers, instead reflecting their limited employment opportunities and concentration in certain types of work.
- Fathers' use of flexible working arrangements was generally far lower than mothers', but a higher proportion of fathers than mothers used 9-day fortnights or worked at/from home where available, probably because these did not affect their pay or full-time working patterns.

Non-resident fathers

One of the aspects of contemporary family life is that family formation is less stable than 30 years ago, and relationship breakdown more common. Lone parenthood has increased and a significant minority of fathers do not reside with their children. Around 15 per cent of MCS babies were born to parents who were not in a union and living together, so the analysis contains fascinating data on the extent to which non-resident fathers are involved in their young children's lives. The evidence shows that the majority of absent fathers were still in contact with their children, although the

quality and degree of involvement differed depending on the parents' relationship and was liable to change over time.

In many cases, non-resident fathers maintained close contact with their child, but this varied depending on the friendliness of the father's and mother's relationship.

- The majority of babies born to parents who were not living together were unplanned, but one in two fathers were present at the birth, and two-thirds were named as the father on the child's birth certificate (Kiernan, 2005).
- Being at the child's birth and the formally recorded father were strong predictors of the father's future contact with, and involvement in, their child's life (Kiernan, 2005).
- 64 per cent of non-resident fathers were still in contact when their child was 9-10 months old, but this was highly correlated with the nature of the relationship between the parents. Where the mother had a very friendly relationship with the father, 94 per cent of fathers were very interested in their child, compared with only 26 per cent of fathers being very interested where the parents were unfriendly.
- Just over a third of in-contact absent fathers saw their 9-10 month old child daily, and the level of contact rose the more interested he was in the child and the better his relationship with the mother.
- Non-resident fathers were also involved in childcare, but to a lesser extent than fathers who lived with their children. Around 1 in 8 employed lone mothers used the non-resident father for childcare.

The parents' relationship with each other also had an impact on the likelihood of the father to support their child financially.

- Where fathers were in contact, rates of paying maintenance were far higher for fathers who had an interest in their child (59 per cent) than for those who had little interest (33 per cent).
- Similarly, rates of payment were higher the friendlier the father's relationship with the mother, and where there was a higher frequency of contact between the father and child: 63 per cent who saw their child daily paid maintenance compared with 32 per cent who saw the child less than weekly.
- 29 per cent of fathers who had been involved with their child at 9-10 months had little or no interest by the time the child was 3. In contrast, 36 per cent of fathers who had little or no interest at 9-10 months were said to be interested or very interested in their three year old.
- There were also changes in the frequency of contact between the two age groups with movement in both directions, from less contact at 9-10 months to more at age three, and vice versa.

So what are the lessons for policy makers?

Fathers' roles are multi-faceted. Hands-on caring and active engagement with children are now as much a part of fathering as being the provider. Fathers' earnings often become more significant around the birth of their child, when many mothers reduce their working hours or withdraw from employment whilst their child is young. So new fathers are balancing two conflicting demands – increased financial responsibility for the family and a strong desire for a close, warm, involved relationship with their baby.

Much progress has been made in recent years to recognise fathers' roles, including the introduction of statutory paid paternity leave and the right to request flexible working for fathers of young children. But there remains a widespread presumption that mothers, not fathers, are responsible for the care of children and the involvement of fathers tends to be underplayed. These cultural expectations around mothers' and fathers' roles are at variance with the growing expectation of both women and men that they will both have working and caring roles. Traditional norms continue to influence workplace culture, making it more difficult in practice for fathers than mothers to adjust their working patterns when they become a parent. The low level of statutory paternity pay (£112.75 a week) makes taking leave around the birth unaffordable for many, particularly for fathers on low pay whose employers, as other research shows, are the least likely to top it up back to its usual level, and also for the self-employed who are not even entitled to any statutory paternity pay.

Policy recommendations

Balancing work and family

Fathers are currently only entitled to two weeks' paid paternity leave and up to three months' unpaid parental leave. We want to see:

- Greater financial support to enable low paid fathers to take their full entitlement to paternity leave
- Entitlement for paternity pay extended to self-employed fathers.
- Early implementation of the proposed new right for fathers to take paid Additional Paternity Leave where a mother returns from maternity leave between 6-12 months after her baby's birth.

Fathers with a child aged under six have a statutory right to request flexible working. In practice fewer fathers make requests and, where they do so, they are more likely than mothers to have their requests refused. We want to see:

- Changes to workplace culture to accept more flexible work practices that would fit fathers' parenting role.
- Stronger legal protection from unfair discrimination for fathers with caring responsibilities
- Extension of the right to request flexible working to everyone, so that more fathers can take advantage of the right to request without fearing their career will suffer.

⇒ **Employment and skills**

Though most fathers are employed, the poorest families are those where the father is unemployed or in low paid or part-time work. Low incomes impair child well-being and strains family relationships. We would like to see:

- Effective schemes to improve the employability and skills of both fathers and mothers who are unemployed, or in low pay, low skill occupations, to enhance their earnings potential.
- Assistance with job search for both partners in an unemployed couple, backed by childcare support and wider availability of flexible work.

⇒ **Access to services**

There is growing recognition of the importance of involving fathers in family and children's services that we welcome. Evidence from these surveys indicates the connection between fathers' roles and characteristics and child development. In particular, we would like to see:

- Early diagnosis and treatment for fathers with depression because, as with mothers, paternal depression can have a negative impact upon children's development;
- Wider employment of men in children's and family services.
- Recognition by health, education and childcare services that both mothers *and* fathers are responsible and need to be involved and consulted about matters relating to the development and well-being of their child. For example, we would like to see Health Visitors seeing *both* parents after the baby's birth.

⇒ **Non-resident fathers**

Fathers who do not live with their children can retain close, involved relationships with them. (Other studies have shown the importance of continuing father involvement in the well-being of children). This analysis highlights the connection between how friendly the parents are and whether or not the father remains active in his child's life. We would like to see:

- Access to relationship support (whether or not mothers and fathers are living together) because poor relationships between parents can impair a father's relationship with his children to their longer-term emotional and economic detriment.

⇒ **Research**

This research shows interesting connections between fathers' health, employment and leave-taking behaviour on child well-being. We would like to see:

- More research to enlarge our understanding across Great Britain of those factors which impact on children's life chances and so on longer-term social cohesion.
- Follow up research and policy development by the CEHR, using this important quantitative longitudinal database, to explore a range of equality factors on the developing life chances for the 2000 cohort of children.

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